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INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 002661

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NEA/MAG FOR HARRIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/29/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KMPI](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: MOVEMENT OF 18 OCTOBER: WEAK, DIVIDED, BUT
OPTIMISTIC ON ONE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY

REF: A. TUNIS 387
[1](#)B. TUNIS 224

Classified By: CDA David Ballard for Reasons 1.4 b & d

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The Movement of 18 October, a disparate group of opposition political leaders and activists promoting freedom of expression, association, and amnesty for political prisoners, recently marked its one year anniversary. While movement leaders claim the group has sent a strong message to the GOT, and has significant support at home and abroad, the minimal domestic impact the group made by undertaking a month-long hunger strike in October 2005 has largely faded. Movement leaders admit that the group has not been as effective as they had hoped, but they plan to continue and strengthen activities. Meanwhile, internal disagreements, particularly on the inclusion of Islamist elements in the Movement, threaten to fracture the group. End Summary.

Weak Year for 18 October, but Hopes for the Future

[1](#)2. (C) In October 2005, in the run-up to the UN World Summit on the Information Society, with the world's attention turned ever so slightly to Tunisia, eight opposition political leaders and civil society activists went on a month-long hunger strike to demand three things: freedom of association, freedom of expression, and a general amnesty for political prisoners (reftels). Committees formed throughout Tunisia and abroad to support the group and the hunger strike was highlighted in international media.

[1](#)3. (C) One year later, the group's limited popularity has waned, and, given the dearth of independent domestic news media, one would be hard pressed to find a Tunisian on the street who has even heard of the Movement of 18 October. Legal opposition party PDP President and 18 October leader Nejib Chebbi recently told PolOff that there had been "weakness" in the ability of 18 October to reach out beyond the small Tunisian activist community, while simultaneously optimistically claiming that the group would press on. He said that the Movement had succeeded in that the GOT realized that 18 October was an important, new, and "dangerous" phenomenon in Tunisia, in that activists of all political stripes joined together to support the Movement's goals.

Anniversary Meeting

[1](#)4. (C) On October 18, on the one-year anniversary of the original hunger strike, approximately 200 people, according to Chebbi, attended an 18 October event at PDP headquarters in Tunis. Over the past year, according to fellow 18 October

leader Khamis Chammari, the GOT has blocked 36 meetings of the group. However, the anniversary event was allowed to take place, albeit under heavy police presence. Chebbi said that the group had informed the Interior Ministry in advance, and sent out invitations for the event. (In the past, 18 October leaders have reported that their meetings were organized and conducted more or less secretly.) One former Islamist An-Nahdha party leader, Ali Laaridh, was reportedly blocked from entering the meeting.

18 October Structure: Forum and Collective

15. (C) According to Chebbi, Movement leaders have developed two separate entities under the 18 October banner: the Forum of 18 October and the Collective of 18 October. The Forum was envisaged as a space for debate and scholarly discussion about political and social topics deemed crucial to Tunisia's future. Chebbi said proposed topics included women's rights, Islam and the state, and the penal code. Two Forum discussions had taken place in the past year, with approximately 80 people attending each session, which were moderated by university professors.

16. (C) The Collective of 18 October, comprised of 22 individuals, including the eight original 18 October hunger strikers and members the committee originally formed to support them, is responsible for the group's policy and actions. Prominent leaders in the group besides Chebbi include long-time activist Khemais Chemmari, and opposition party Democratic Forum for Labor and Freedoms (FDTL) Secretary General Mustapha Ben Jaafar. Mokhtar Yahyaoui, a

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former judge turned activist, who was among the original hunger strikes, left the collective early in 2006. He told

PolOff that he left due to the inability of the group to mobilize any popular support, and to a distaste for the political machinations of the group's leadership. Chebbi countered privately that Yahyaoui "doesn't work well with others", and claimed that his departure was primarily for personal, not policy, reasons.

Islamist Question

17. (C) The group's alliance between secularist opposition parties and Islamists has proven to be the most contentious issue facing the group, potentially threatening to fracture the Movement. Several prominent Islamists, including Mohamed Nouri, president of the International Association for the Support of Political Prisoners (AISPP), were among the original 18 October strikers. Since then, An-Nahdha leaders such as Ali Laaridh and Zied Doulatli have joined the movement. 18 October leaders such as Mustapha Ben Jaafar have responded to criticism from anti-Islamist quarters by explicitly stating that any political party, including Islamists, sharing the 18 October goals could join the movement, although he excluded "extremists." In the months after, however, internal splits in the Collective on the Islamist question began forming, with some members fearing that Islamists were only using the Movement for political gain. These members noted that the Islamist representatives refused to engage in any debate that would force them to define specific political platforms.

18. (C) Chebbi and Chammari have both admitted separately that the Islamist question remains a "grey area," and was a source of internal friction. Chammari told PolCouns that, while he saw the alliance with Islamists as a tactical necessity, but something to avoid in the long term, Chebbi was more comfortable with the "grey area" of the Islamist alliance, and saw the potential of a longer-term strategic alliance with Islamists. Previously, 18 October members had said that the *raison d'etre* of the group was the realization of its

three demands, and that once achieved, the political alliance would dissolve. However, Chebbi recently told PolOff for the first time that he could see 18 October potentially growing to be an opposition political force in itself.

Comment

¶9. (C) Despite Chebbi's forecast, 18 October will more likely continue on its path to anonymity than become a strong opposition party. It is difficult to determine which is more constrained: the operating space of opposition political parties or the average Tunisian's interest in these parties. Although the movement may not be able to mobilize widespread support given the constrictive political climate in Tunisia, their demands are valid and track with USG goals for political reform in Tunisia. The GOT, which suprisingly allowed an anniversary event of the group, has benefited from the internal schism over Islamists in the Movement, a fact not lost on 18 October leaders.

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